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SUBJECT: RUSSIA-GEORGIA RELATIONS: A SMALL THAW?

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells.  
Reasons 1.4 (B/D).

¶1. (C) Summary. Amid abundant press coverage of FM Lavrov's attendance at Saakashvili's January 20 inauguration in Tbilisi, the MFA January 21 issued a terse statement reporting that Lavrov had met with the Georgian president, opposition leaders and the Catholic Patriarch during his visit. GOR officials downplayed the press description of Lavrov's visit as a signal of a "thaw," reiterating that future developments would hinge on concrete steps by the GOG; however, Lavrov's invitation for a visit by the Georgian Foreign Minister remains on the table. Moscow analysts did not rule out a slight improvement in the near future, but predicted that Georgia's geopolitical preference for Euro-Atlantic integration and NATO would make full-fledged normalization difficult. End summary.

#### Lavrov's Visit -----

¶2. (U) In a January 21 statement, the MFA affirmed that, at Putin's request, FM Lavrov took part in the inauguration ceremony of Saakashvili and met him on the margins to exchange views on bilateral issues. The statement said Lavrov expressed appreciation to Catholic Patriarch of Georgia Iliya II for his contribution to maintaining and strengthening the traditional ties between the peoples and churches of the two countries and noted Lavrov's meeting with opposition leaders.

¶3. (C) MFA Georgia Desk Head Aleksey Pavlovskiy told us January 22 that the decision to send Lavrov to the ceremony was not an easy one. The visit was "symbolic," aimed at signaling that Russia was serious about "mending" the tattered relationship. Pavlovskiy stressed that the visit itself should be taken as a GOR declaration of intention. The Saakashvili-Lavrov Tbilisi meeting had been "generic," with no planned agenda, he said. One meaningful outcome was an agreement that then-FM Bezhuashvili's would visit Moscow in early February. On January 24, following the announcement of Bezhuashvili's planned departure from office, Pavlovskiy told us that the invitation to the new Foreign Minister stands and that the GOR remains interested in hearing concrete proposals for improving relations.

¶4. (C) Although the GOR was ready to work with the GOG, Pavlovskiy said it would be too simple to say Russia would cancel economic sanctions absent a "sincere effort" to improve relations by the Georgians. An olive branch extended by Saakashvili, who just a few months ago had engaged in "outrageous" anti-Russia tactics, could not be taken at face value, as earlier, similar gestures had been quickly followed by rhetoric and provocation, Pavlovskiy added.

#### Rapid Improvement Unlikely -----

¶5. (C) Moscow analysts predict there will be a slight, near-term improvement in the relationship but no radical change for the better. Many think that Moscow is not ready to compromise, while Georgia's insistence that Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain a top priority item on the agenda is "unrealistic." Georgia's demand that Russia stop giving financial support to Abkhazia is "simply not going to happen," said one analyst. Although experts agreed that no Georgian politician could afford to put the territorial dispute on the back burner, linking all bilateral relations to it meant continued impasse.

¶6. (C) Given the stiff GOR public reception to the re-elected Saakashvili, experts continue to believe that Georgia's aspirations to Euro-Atlantic integration and NATO membership preclude any prospect for a more solid long-term improvement in the relationship. Despite Saakashvili's expressed willingness to improve ties with Russia, Moscow remains concerned that the January 5 referendum improved Georgia's NATO prospects. Analysts blamed NATO for its "failed" efforts to cure Russia's "NATophobia," which still posits NATO expansion as a threat.

¶7. (C) Although experts here doubt the GOR's sincerity, they have little respect for Saakashvili. They find it difficult to imagine that four years ago he was the most popular politician among the Russian public, while the Russian mass media willingly featured him as a hero, who fought corruption and defended ordinary citizens. With that hagiography long gone, Saakashvili is now the target of derision. Scholars at the Institute of Europe maintain that Saakashvili's latest mistake was not to agree to a second election round. It is generally believed in Moscow that irregularities and falsification produced 3 percent of the votes, enough to allow Saakashvili to win in the first round. An unfocused, divided opposition meant, experts here believe, that Saakashvili would have won easily in round two and put to rest doubts about round one falsifications. Those doubts will linger for a long time, they believe, and erode the legitimacy of Saakashvili's presidency.

#### Concrete Steps Needed to Improve Ties

¶8. (C) Among the small, concrete steps that experts here believe could improve the tone of GOG-GOR relations are joint monitoring of the Ingushetia, Dagestan borders; improved economic infrastructure in regions of Georgia to create more favorable conditions for Russian business; and increases in exchange programs where Georgian students receive higher education in Russian universities. Such initiatives, followed by a more relaxed visa regime, the resumption of direct flights, and a relaxed import/export regime could create a better environment for discussions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

#### Comment

¶9. (C) While Putin's departure in May could help Russia-Georgian relations become less personality-bound and provide the impulse necessary to re-shape the bilateral agenda, Russia's antagonism towards Georgia's NATO aspirations and Medvedev's neophyte status on foreign policy will continue to complicate normalization.

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